

Water Baptism
“Out of the Waters Into Life”
Text: Mark 1:1-15
3-26-17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

Perhaps it would be good to rehearse with one another your own experience of baptism.

“Why do you think that Paul offers baptism by immersion (‘to dip under’) as the portrayal of our old life (death) and our new life (resurrection) in Jesus?”

“Baptism is a decisive moment. An entering into the water. Can you describe a decisive moment in your own life with Jesus that set a new trajectory for your life? Why do such profound faith movements seem to require some way of ‘acting out’ what we believe?”

Throughout the Story of God in the Bible, we find water being associated with significant moments when humanity became aware that they were interacting with God and that those moments invited some response. Perhaps you might look up some of the instances and dialogue about the significance of the moment (Exodus 14; Joshua 3; Romans 6:1-5; Matthew 28:18-20)

Teaching Notes...

For all of which we are capable as humanity--- global connectivity, genetic engineering, making tofu taste like meat, getting tiny pretzels inside of M&M’s--- we are ***incurably religious*** (beliefs/observances of deity).

We’ve always had the suspicion that we are not “self-explanatory”. There was something/someone “other”, which was responsible (even if we couldn’t agree on the nature of that other or on how we should interact with it).

Our approach to life has always involved a “paradigm”: a way of seeing and explaining our current experience which allowed us to relate to our world.

Our paradigm evoked some way of responding out of our conclusions. It involved an “ethic”--- a way of being together which offered the most favorable experience of being human.

The themes that permeates the biblical narrative are: “captivity and freedom”; “exile and restoration”; “leaving and coming home again”.

The central narrative of the Jewish people has always been the “Exodus” (inclusive of Passover). The word is derived from (2) Greek words meaning “out” (ex) and “way” (odos). A “way out”. Jesus took his cue from this OT back-story. It was this narrative that provided the impetus for his teachings and his actions.

Mark begins quotes from (2) prophets, Malachi (3:1) and Isaiah (40:3).

Story: The background for the word “*gospel*” (both declaration and invitation) is rooted in the writings of Isaiah. He is writing to a group of people who are in “*exile*”. Exile was not just a geographical location, but about a condition: living under another’s rule; functioning under another’s will.

- They were living within a story that said that although God had previously “*pulled his endorsement*” from them, he would one day return to them, and by virtue of his own self-initiated movement, would forgive them and restore the relationship.

Isaiah established an expectation of a “*way-preparer*” as a means of signaling this fresh movement of God (e.g. much like someone who runs ahead of an arriving King). The expectation of this one would be that he would operate in the “*spirit and power of Elijah*” [Luke 1:17]. Jesus, as well as others, made the connection between Elijah [OT prophet: 2 Kings 1:8; Malachi 4:5; Matthew 11:14]. and John the Baptist.

So, you can imagine that when John the Baptist arrives on the scene, all dressed up in prophet’s clothes, with bits of bugs in his beard, it would seem that this was not simply an announcement, but a “dramatic presentation”.

Jordan River: The Jordan, you might recall, is what the Israelites crossed after their extended vacation in the desert. They crossed over into the land of promise, not due to their own “swift-water skills”, but by miraculous intervention--- God acting within history to do for them what they could not do for themselves except trust and respond.

Jesus: the new Moses. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:2, that just as people were “*baptized into Moses*” by crossing the Red Sea, now people were being “*baptized into Jesus*” (Romans 6:3-11).

Now, imagine, if you will, that you are a Jew living in the first century whose entire life and worldview has been informed and formed by this “God-story” found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Mark, by bringing together the images and themes of desert (wilderness), repentance and the Jordan River, intends for people to make some connections with the story that has been going on for a long time: “***This is what we’ve been waiting for!***”

The imagery would have been clear: By entering the water with the people, Jesus is portraying himself to be the one who was coming to lead the people into a “new exodus”: through the waters of death and out the other side into life--- a promised and promising life. It would be a life accompanied and empowered by the Presence.

To refuse to “repent” (re-think, re-order, re-align your life) meant to refuse to cross; refuse to enter and to stay in captivity. Paradoxically, you can actually be free and still be living in captivity!

As the church was attempting to understand how God had revealed himself, appreciating all of the uniqueness and mystery, they spoke of God as being “triune”. “Trinity”.

This three-personed-God---Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--- was, in and of themselves, “community”. Relationship. Each was an active participant functioning inter-dependently, and submissively to one another.

Greek theologians used a common word to describe (not define) this mysterious God:

“perichoresis”: *peri-* around, *choresis-* dance

It's a concept that's easily observable in the “barn dance”. The music starts, the partners join hands and all begin to move around in a circle. At times in the dance, they release their hands, only to move toward another, or welcome another into the circle, without interrupting the dance, itself.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are so synchronized in their movements that they move as one. They move so beautifully and fluidly that although they are each unique, they are seen as one.

God is the hand, always reaching out to draw us into the sacred dance. It means there are no non-participants in the Trinitarian life. In the dance, we discover ourselves as unique participants, moving not only in rhythm with God, but in-sync with one another. May I propose that “sin” is the interruption of that rhythm.

In baptism, we get named in the same breath as “God”.

We find ourselves in the company of God (e.g. like hall of fame athletes who find themselves identified with those they emulated). In baptism, we enter into the Story. We enter into mystery. We are being immersed into a life that we can neither fully explain nor fully control. We *“trust fall”* into grace! It's a life that is being continuously put to the test (e.g. out of the water and into the desert).

Baptism defines us.

Stepping into those waters identifies us, first and foremost, with Jesus. But, it also identifies with a community of people who are coming to understand how Jesus informs the life that they are living together. What the author of Hebrews calls a *“great cloud of witnesses”* (12).

Baptism identifies us.

To be baptized is to be immersed. It is a powerful metaphor and symbolism for walking voluntarily out of your old, self-indulgent, self-directed lives, into identification with Jesus' own immersion into our sin and brokenness, and out the other side to new life.

So, today when we baptize, we will do so ***“In the name of the Father, ...”*** The phrase ***“in the name”*** (lit. ‘into the name’) indicates that the person being baptized is closely bound to or has become the property of the one into whose name they are being baptized.

Jesus joins us in the waters of baptism and says, ***“You belong to me! You're mine!”***

We are no longer understood by our race, our language, our lineage, our social status, our political preference or our gender (even though none of that is forfeited), but by our baptism--- **our identity “in” and “with” Christ.**

Baptism demands messy-participation.

It says that there are any number of ways for us to get along in life, but none without involvement with the ‘other’.

Now, this three-personed-God invites us to participation: saving, healing, loving, restoring, forgiving, serving, blessing. To know God--- to relate well with him--- is to join in with his movements.

Today, you may not see the dove or hear the voice, but I trust that you recognize the delight of the community and hear our confirmation of your new identity celebrating that you belong to God and you belong with us.